

Age does not predict success for those in court-based mental health treatment programs

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Statistics show that the amount of older adults in the criminal justice system has quadrupled in the past 15 years. Many of the adults have histories of mental health problems and are being placed in court-based treatment programs, where government officials and social workers tend to think that they are more likely to experience success compared to their younger counterparts. However, new research by Kelli Canada, assistant professor in the University of Missouri School of Social Work, shows that although mental health court participants older than 50 adhere to treatment programs better than younger adults, they are just as likely to be reincarcerated or relapse into criminal behavior.

"Caseworkers often view [older adults](#) in mental health courts as more willing to follow guidelines, attend counseling and less likely to violate parole," Canada said. "However, empirical data shows that older adults experience the same substance use, housing instability and risk for reincarceration compared to [younger adults](#)."

Mental health courts are intensive treatment programs designed to address individuals' underlying mental problems that contribute to their criminal behaviors. Mental health courts divert criminal offenders from prison into [treatment programs](#), where the emphasis is on mental health assessment, individualized treatment plans and ongoing judicial monitoring.

Canada said that it can be dangerous for court officials to assume that older adults in mental health courts will have better outcomes. Additionally, critics of court-based programs might question the programs' usefulness when participants, who are thought to be at a lower level of risk, relapse or are reincarcerated.

"We need to stop thinking of age as a protective factor in the criminal justice system and mental health courts," Canada said. "We need to make sure individuals receive full assessments of how the program can help them. If older adults are perceived to have lower risk of substance abuse or reincarceration, the treatment teams might not address their needs as thoroughly and effectively."

Canada's study, "Psychosocial and Reincarceration Risks Among Older Adults in Mental Health Courts," appeared in the *American Journal of Geriatric Psychiatry*. Canada's co-researchers included Eunyoung Jang, a [social work](#) doctoral student at MU, and Malitta Engstrom from the University of Pennsylvania. The School of Social Work is part of the MU College of Human Environmental Sciences.

Provided by University of Missouri-Columbia

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